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Sisters in Spirit: The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio and Their Consorority in Early Sixteenth-Century Florence

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Formal associations of pious women, or consororities, were rare in Italy before the second half of the sixteenth century. This article examines a previously unstudied consorority, called the Company of the Holy Miracle, founded in Florence in 1534 by a group of Benedictine nuns who revived an older, cult-based organization to enlarge their local influence. Composed solely of laywomen and nuns, the Miracolo Company opened up a public arena in which members could express their religiosity and govern themselves, using diverse corporate models. Shared administrative and devotional activities allowed the socially mixed membership to create fictive kinship ties and sustain cross-class sociability at a time when all-male brotherhoods were becoming more homogeneous and hierarchical. Founded in the transition from republic to principate, the group reflected both the greater localism of cult life and the growing clout of nunneries, which structured new forms of public life for Florentine women.

In January 1534 the Benedictine nuns of Sant'Ambrogio, one of the oldest convents in Florence, founded a new devotional organization called the Company of the Holy Miracle (Compagnia del Santissimo Miracolo). What distinguished this group from the many other religious associations of its day was its exclusively female membership. The Company of the Holy Miracle, composed solely of laywomen and nuns, stood in stark contrast to the vast majority of Florentine pious organizations, whose membership rolls included few, if any, women. The success of the group was immediate. Within five months of its establishment, the Company had enrolled sixty-six dues-paying members. Among the charter members were several well-born nuns of the convent and their servants, along with the wives of prominent merchants and tradesmen.[1]

[1]Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal governo francese (hereafter CRSGF), 79, vol. 144. This foundation document is housed in Archivio di Stato, Florence; it contains both the company's statutes and its initial membership list. Unless noted otherwise, all archival references are to the Archivio di Stato, Florence. Translations are my own. The Florentine year began on 25 March; all dates in the text and notes have been modernized.

Luciano Artusi and Antonio Patruno, *Ora et Labora. L'antico complesso religioso e l'opera pia di Sant'Ambrogio di Firenze* (Florence: Semper, 1996), 63, claim that by the end of January 1534 the company had enrolled 115 members. However, they provide no documentary evidence or apparatus to verify this statement, which is not supported by my findings.

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In recent years historians have recognized that confraternal groups like the Miracolo played a central role in the construction of early modern society.[2] Religious brotherhoods, originating in the heady religious atmosphere of the thirteenth century, operated as one of the principal forms of social organization across late medieval Europe, especially in urban centers.[3] Confraternities opened up a corporate, public arena in which the laity could develop and express particular forms of religiosity, whether charitable, flagellant, or devotional in nature. In the sixteenth century these same groups mediated changes in gender and class relations that characterized an increasingly hierarchical society, while expanding their role as agencies of social welfare and social control. Along with a host of new institutions such as conservatories, orphanages, and women's asylums, confraternities dedicated to the rehabilitation of prostitutes and marginalized groups like Jews sprang up as part of a renewed urban apostolate in late sixteenth-century Italy.[4]

Despite these rich new studies, the place of women in confraternal life has remained elusive, especially before the advent of specialized sororities spawned by the Catholic and Counter-Reformations. The precise number of women enrolled in confraternities in various locales, their degree of activity in corporate ritual and devotion, and their responsibility in confraternal administration in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy have yet to be excavated fully from the historical record. Still more enigmatic are the scattered local examples of all-female associations found in Italian urban centers prior to 1600. Pious organizations of laywomen, which I refer to here as consororities, afford the opportunity not only to enlarge our understanding of women's historical experiences. These groups open up a wider range of questions about gendered forms of association in early modern Italy,

[2]For an excellent, recent historiographical introduction to confraternity studies in Italy, see Nicholas Terpstra, "The Politics of Ritual Kinship," and Christopher F. Black, "The Development of Confraternity Studies over the Past Thirty Years," in *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Nicholas Terpstra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–8, 9–29.

[3]The bibliography on confraternities is extensive. Some of the key studies include Christopher F. Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); G.G. Meersseman and G. Pacini, *Ordo fraternitatis. Confraternite e pietà dei laici nel Medioevo*, 3 vols. (Rome: Herder, 1977); and Ronald F. E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

[4]Lance Lazar, "The First Jesuit Confraternities and Marginalized Groups in Sixteenth-Century Rome," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 132–49, notes the 1542 founding by Ignatius Loyola of a shelter for former prostitutes and battered women whose administration was entrusted to a confraternity, the Compagnia della Grazia, as well as the establishment of a second confraternal shelter for the daughters of prostitutes and other young endangered women. On the growth of women's asylums and related charitable institutions, see Sherrill Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums since 1500: From Refuges for Ex-Prostitutes to Shelters for Battered Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Lucia Ferrante, "Honor Regained: Women in the Casa del Soccorso di San Paolo in Sixteenth-Century Bologna," in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 46–72; and Monica Chojnacka, "Women, Charity and Community in Early Modern Venice: The Casa delle Zitelle," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 68–91. The bibliography on orphanages can be approached through Nicholas Terpstra, "In Loco Parentis: Confraternities and Abandoned Children in Florence and Bologna," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 114–31.

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especially when compared to all-male or mixed-gender corporations. Consororities provide important evidence about the social composition of formalized female groups, class relations and ties of sociability among women, modes and objectives of female piety, the kinds of historical conditions and institutional frameworks that supported these groups, and the models of governance consororal women chose for themselves, as women governing women.

This essay examines these issues through the lens of the Company of the Holy Miracle, a previously unstudied consorority in sixteenth-century Florence. Part 1 situates the group in its historical terrain and examines the particular circumstances that gave rise to its foundation. Part 2 analyzes the company's pious objectives, social composition, and administrative structure. Here I focus on the nature and extent of cross-class sociability embodied in the group, the role of parish and convent in creating and sustaining women's networks, and the politicized meanings attached to diverse corporate models of governance. The rich nature of the evidence permits both a fine-grained analysis of this sororal organization in the first two decades of its existence and a consideration of the larger implications of this case study in spiritual sisterhood.

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A survey of the religious landscape of late medieval and early modern Italy reveals that consororities were rare but not unknown. Although female-only societies were present in Italy as early as the fourteenth century, some, if not most, of these groups functioned as parallel or auxiliary organizations to men's associations. The majority of exclusively female organizations currently known sprang up only in the second half of the Cinquecento or later.[5] In his study of Italian confraternities in the sixteenth century, Christopher Black notes the existence of two well-recognized female-only societies dating from this era: the Neapolitan Devote di Gesù, extant from at least 1554, composed of noblewomen dedicated to the sacraments and to helping their neighbors, and the Roman company of Sant'Anna per le Donne, dating from 1640, another group of noblewomen who sought to organize the spiritual and physical welfare of the less fortunate. In 1592 the diocese of Perugia, including both city and countryside, counted 147 confraternities, sixteen of which were mixed-gender and nine exclusively female groups. The Spoletan diocese claimed eight consororities in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[6] Elsewhere in Italy, societies devoted to particular altars sprang up as small, often short-lived ventures after 1550.

The Company of the Holy Miracle differed from its corporate female counterparts in several significant ways: in its size, social composition, administrative

[5]Black, *Italian Confraternities*, 34–35; Giovanna Casagrande, "Confraternities and Lay Female Religiosity in Late Medieval and Renaissance Umbria," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 48–66; and idem, "Women in Confraternities between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age: Research in Umbria," *Confraternitas* 5, no. 2 (1994): 3–13.

[6]Casagrande, "Confraternities and Lay Religiosity," 60–61.

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structure, institutional affiliation, and origins. The Miracolo was not an auxiliary group to a male brotherhood but was a self-governing entity. The consorority selected its own officers and maintained its own administration; every aspect of management was guided and staffed by female members, ranging from the collection of dues to the visitation of sick members. While the group depended on male clerics for their sacramental cult life, just as did female convents, these laywomen remained free of the male supervision that characterized consororities in sixteenth-century Bologna.[7] Furthermore, unlike other sororities in sixteenth-century Italy dominated by affluent noblewomen, the Company of the Holy Miracle showed a strikingly heterogeneous mix of social classes, as will be detailed later. The Miracolo also took root in an unlikely locale; it was affiliated with a working-class parish church attached to a traditional nunnery, far removed from the hot spots of Medicean or mendicant patronage. Further distinguishing this unique group was the fact that no other Florentine convent, Benedictine or otherwise, sponsored a formal organization that mixed nuns and laywomen. Although secular and religious women frequently joined together to establish consororities in colonial Latin America, this practice was quite rare in pre-Tridentine Italy.[8]

One of the most distinctive features of the Miracolo was its comparatively robust size. Consororities always claimed much smaller enrollments than did all-male or mixed-gender associations, particularly those with Marian or charitable orientations. For example, the Florentine youth confraternity of the Purification of the Virgin, composed entirely of boys between twelve and eighteen years old, boasted approximately six hundred members in the mid-fifteenth century, while larger flagellant companies in the same period enrolled between 200 and 250 members.[9] With its sixty-six charter members, the Miracolo fell far short of this strength, but nonetheless approached more closely in size the newly reorganized charitable confraternity of the Misericordia, whose 1490 statutes limited the group to seventy-two men, thirty of whom were to be priests.[10]

Comparing enrollment figures in female-only sodalities with those of mixed-gender groups is more problematic. Quantifying the exact number of women in brotherhoods is complicated by the enormous diversity in confraternal structures, on the one hand, and by the problem of sources on the other. Various sodalities, like the Roman confraternity that ran the renowned hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, operated as quasi-religious orders that included male clerics, oblates of both sexes, and lay members who lived within the hospital complex. In

[7]Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144.

[8]Prof. Susan Webster of the University of St. Thomas is studying confraternities associated with female convents in Quito from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. In a private correspondence Prof. Webster documented the existence of at least fifteen corporations, many with all female memberships, at four convents.

[9]Lorenzo Polizzotto, "The Medici and the Youth Confraternity of the Purification of the Virgin, 1434–1506," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 98–113; Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 440.

[10]Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 441; the reorganization of the Misericordia is discussed in C. Torricelli et al., *La Misericordia di Firenze attraverso i secoli* (Florence: Il Torchio, 1975), 55–59.

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both its organization and administrative records, the confraternity of Santo Spirito blurred the boundaries distinguishing semireligious *suore* from lay *sorelle* who sustained the hospital's charitable work outside the community, making precise counts impossible.[11] By contrast, other mixed-gender groups established distinct parallel structures for women members, who were allocated specific active roles and their own administrators; still other associations barred *sorelle* from company activities except on rare occasions.[12] The sketchy nature of many confraternal records presents additional problems in determining female enrollments. Matriculation lists, when they exist at all, might either overstate a female presence by listing the wives, mothers, and daughters of fraternal members, or significantly underplay it by omitting the names of those same women "so as not to multiply the words," as one Venetian group put it.[13] Other forms of documentation, such as episcopal and pastoral visitation records, sometimes fail to mention mixed-gender groups or inconsistently report their composition.[14]

The formal matriculation list of the Miracolo compiled in 1534 permits an unusually concrete point of comparison with other female sodalities. Claiming an opening membership of sixty-six women identified individually by name, the Miracolo clearly surpassed in size most other sixteenth-century devotional sororities scattered across the peninsula. Groups dedicated to Sant'Orsola, oriented toward girls of marriageable age, or the widows' groups honoring Sant'Anna,

[11]Eunice D. Howe, "Appropriating Space: Women's Place in Confraternal Life at Santo Spirito in Sassia, Rome," in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy: Ritual, Spectacle, Image*, ed. Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235–58. Some women, however, left autograph subscriptions in the confraternity's record book, which is still preserved. Female signatories included only two Roman women, and at least one Florentine noblewoman, Lauretta, wife of Carlo Martelli, who enrolled herself and her mother Nannina, widow of Giovanni de' Medici, in 1482; Anna Esposito, "Men and Women in Roman Confraternities in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Roles, Functions, Expectations," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 82–97, at 93.

[12]For example, the Bolognese sacramental company founded in 1566 by the zealous Bishop Paleotti claimed an opening membership of 128 men and 140 women, who had their own prioress; Christopher F. Black, "Confraternities and the Parish in the Context of Italian Catholic Reform," in *Confraternities and Catholic Reform in Italy, France, and Spain*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly and Michael W. Maher (Kirksville, Mo.: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999), 1–26, at 12. A very different attitude pertained in the Corpus Domini brotherhood attached to San Frediano in Florence. In 1573 this group permitted women to attend company meetings only once a year, "so that the opportunity to expose or slander us will be removed and this is done for the salvation of the souls of each of our sisters"; Black, *Italian Confraternities*, 34.

[13]Casagrande, "Confraternities and Lay Female Religiosity," 57–59, provides some useful hard data. The Raccomandati della Vergine in Assisi, founded circa 1270, compiled a matriculation list recording 85 women and 284 men. By contrast, the confraternity of Santa Maria del Mercato of Gubbio manifested the opposite gender ratio; over the course of the fourteenth century, the group enrolled 1,092 men and 2,160 women. Two fourteenth-century statutes of Venetian *scuole piccole* explained that "in ciaschedun capitoli non siano nominati le sorelle, come li fratelli per non molteplicar troppe parole"; Richard Mackenney, "The Guilds of Venice: State and Society in the Longue Duree," *Studi veneziani* 34 (1997): 15–43, at 40.

[14]Casagrande, "Confraternities and Lay Female Religiosity," 60–61, notes that the pastoral visitation record of the diocese of Perugia in 1592–95, made by the reforming Perugian bishop Napoleone Comitoli, failed to mention both women members in mixed associations and the existence of consororities documented in parallel reports.

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enrolled only a handful of members, ranging from four to twenty women.[15] At the other end of the spectrum, female-centered Rosary companies reportedly attracted thousands of women near the end of the sixteenth century, although these societies were oriented more toward common prayer and personalized piety than toward a rich, meaningful corporate life.[16]

Within its immediate Florentine context, the Miracolo stood out as a still more singular organization. Charles de la Roncière has noted that Florence enrolled few women even in its mixed-gender fraternities compared to other Italian cities. While a much higher number of women appear in varying types of sodalities in the outlying countryside, Florentine urban societies were decidedly unwelcoming to women's presence and participation, even in the parish confraternities that became increasingly popular in the early sixteenth century.[17] Compared to other Italian cities like Rome and Perugia, the Florentine tradition of female-only groups was exceptionally thin.[18] In a city that claimed at least 163 confraternal foundations by 1500, only three other exclusively female associations established between 1303 and 1534 have come to light thus far: San Lorenzo delle Donne, founded 1303; Santa Caterina da Siena, created 1365 at the Dominican citadel of Santa Maria Novella; and Santa Maria del Popolo, organized at the Carmelite church of Santa Maria del Carmine in 1460 by eighty well-born women.[19]

This diminished female presence in both mixed-gender and all-female groups contrasts sharply with the prominence of male youth confraternities in Florence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Companies like the Archangel Raphael (est. 1411), the Purification of the Virgin (est. 1427), and the Savonarolan boys' companies, among others, signaled a preoccupation with the socialization of male youths

[15]Black, *Italian Confraternities*, 34–35.

[16]The Rosary confraternity of Parabiagio in rural Lombardy recruited 2,952 women and 1,224 men between 1576 and 1596, while the Perugian preacher Fra Domenico Baglioni asserted in 1548 that he had attracted over five thousand men and women to his new Rosary society. However, it is worth reiterating that Rosary societies, although female-centered, were not exclusively female in either their membership or administration. Black, *Italian Confraternities*, 38, 103–4.

[17]Charles de la Roncière, "Les confréries à Florence et dans son contado aux XIVe–XVe siècles," in *Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Age: France, Italie, Suisse* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1987), 297–342, at 303–4; Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 212–13.

[18]Esposito, "Men and Women in Roman Confraternities"; Casagrande, "Confraternities and Lay Female Religiosity."

[19]This compilation is derived from the comprehensive survey of Florentine confraternities published by Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 443–74. The available evidence for these three groups is sketchy. Ludovica Sebregondi notes that Santa Caterina da Siena began to keep a register of deceased sisters after 23 March 1553, although she is unaware of the original founding date; she also mentions two sixteenth-century inventories made by the group (1557 and 1560), which included burial cloths, chapel decorations, and a few altar furnishings. See Ludovica Sebregondi, "A Confraternity of Florentine Noble Women," *Confraternitas* 4, no. 2 (1993): 3–6. For archival materials relating to the consorority of Santa Maria del Popolo, see Sharon T. Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 176–77. Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl, "Introduction," *Confraternities and the Visual Arts*, 18 n. 32, discuss the connections between the Popolo consorority and the Brancacci family. Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence* (Florence: Olschki, 1995), 117–20, offers important insights into the study of women and confraternal life in fifteenth-century Florence.

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rarely found to the same degree outside Florence and Tuscany.[20] The significance of boys' companies in the Florentine urban social and political landscape can be demonstrated in numerous ways: by the institutional resources and private patronage these brotherhoods garnered, by the attempts of various interest groups to control or manipulate boys' companies, and by the heightened sense of mission invested in these organizations. Participation in confraternal life bound together a variety of educational, catechetical, and political aims, whose end goal was to curb boys' unruly behavior and groom them for their roles as future governors and citizens. Throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Florentines invested tremendous social energy in the control and acculturation of youths, who were made responsible for leading the city to its mythic destiny as God's "chosen" city.[21] Realizing this redemptive mission turned in part on sustaining the hypermasculinity of Florentine corporate and public life. The imbalance between boys' companies and consororities—in numbers, resources, and significance—framed a larger set of politicized gender relations and suggests that there was more at stake politically in the gendering of confraternal life in Florence than elsewhere on the peninsula.[22]

Given this unwelcoming environment, how can we account for the formation of such an unusual, even anomalous, organization like the Miracolo? What historical processes and circumstances help explain the advent and success of the group? The answer lies in the complex intersection of changing institutional structures and a protracted political crisis running from the foreign invasions of 1494 through the establishment of the Medici principate in 1537. The birth of the Miracolo as an all-female group must be charted against the backdrop of declining civic institutions that accompanied the transformation from republic to principate, the collapse of

[20]This discussion draws on Polizzotto, "Medici and the Confraternity of the Purification"; Konrad Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411–1785* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Richard C. Trexler, "Ritual in Florence: Adolescence and Salvation in the Renaissance," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 200–64; and more generally Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 72, notes the "peculiarly Florentine" character of boys' companies; despite references to similar organizations in the Veneto and Rome, youth confraternities "were neither so numerous nor involved in such elaborate festive pageantry as in Florence." Eisenbichler, *Boys of Archangel Raphael*, 21–22, discusses the smattering of boys' companies found elsewhere in Italy.

[21]Donald Weinstein, "The Myth of Florence," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (London: Faber, 1968), 15–44; Polizzotto, "Medici and the Confraternity of the Purification," 104–5.

[22]A different but related point is made by Jennifer Fisk Rondeau, "Homosociality and Civic (Dis)Order in Late Medieval Italian Confraternities," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 30–47. Rondeau discusses the simultaneous admission and marginalization of women in the adult Florentine company of San Zanobi during the papal interdict of 1377, which "marks the men's recognition of the necessity for relations with women, and the threat an excess of those relations could pose to the primary bonds of the group, those between men" (35). The relationship between gender and piety is approached from the vantage point of property arrangements by Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. In comparing six central Italian cities between 1348 and 1425, Cohn argues that Florence "appears to have been the worst place to have been born a woman, at least in terms of one's discretionary power over property," which in turn funded pious bequests; see Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), at 201.

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traditional Florentine confraternal life, and the centering of cult life in parishes beginning in the 1520s and 1530s.[23] Yet one more piece is crucial to complete the puzzle: the expansion of women's religious houses in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that provided the institutional scaffolding on which the consorority was built.

To understand the origins of the Miracolo, we must turn first to the parish setting in which it took root. The parish of Sant'Ambrogio was a large, sprawling jurisdiction located on the northeastern edge of the city, whose territory extended into the open spaces abutting the third circle of walls. Its physical size and placement on the periphery made real estate cheaper and more available than in the cramped urban center. The parish attracted growing numbers of immigrants, artisans, and foreign textile workers throughout the fifteenth century, making it an increasingly populous and vibrant working-class area by 1500.[24] When the Florentine archbishop Cosimo Pazzi visited the convent as part of his pastoral duties in 1509, the convent's chaplains reported that they ministered to twelve hundred parishioners.[25] One further characteristic distinguished this parish from other Florentine jurisdictions: Sant'Ambrogio was one of only three urban parishes headed by a community of Benedictine nuns.[26]

That the parish of Sant'Ambrogio enjoyed a strong sense of place is demonstrated in several ways. Burial patterns, for instance, reveal a remarkably high rate of parish endogamy and affiliation by the late fifteenth century, with approximately 85 percent of parishioners electing burial in Sant'Ambrogio between 1480 and 1510.[27] Sustaining this robust local tradition was the long-standing working-class festive "kingdom" (*potenza*) of the Red City, whose focal point was the parish church of Sant'Ambrogio.[28] This plebeian brigade enacted its own carnival rites, performed in other local festivities and processions, and collected money for gifts of wax, all of which enhanced local territorial pride and neighborhood integration. So closely interwoven were kingdom and convent in neighborhood identity that the nuns permitted the *potenza* to mark its territory with a stone tablet bearing the kingdom's emblem of a walled city with three towers, mounted on the outside corner of the church circa 1473. In the early sixteenth century the brigade augmented its spatial claims on the heart of its jurisdiction by placing a tabernacle on the opposite side of the piazza, showing the same emblem underneath a figure of

[23] Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 206–20.

[24] Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 120–21.

[25] Archivio Arcivescovile, Firenze (hereafter AAF), Visite pastorali (hereafter VP), 03.1, fasc. 4, unfoliated.

[26] The other two parishes were San Pier Maggiore, whose parish boundaries abutted those of Sant'Ambrogio, and Santa Felicita. A fuller discussion of the relationships between these convents and their parishes is provided in the book on Florentine nunneries which I am now completing.

[27] Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 221–23.

[28] The following discussion is drawn primarily from David Rosenthal, "The Spaces of Plebeian Ritual and the Boundaries of Transgression," in *Florence: Re-Visioning the Renaissance City*, ed. John Paoletti and Roger Crum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

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the parish patron Sant'Ambrogio. Throughout the sixteenth century the kingdom of the Red City flourished and may have enjoyed still closer associations with the nuns by 1600, as plebeian groups and their often transgressive rituals were forced onto a smaller neighborhood stage.

Further enhancing this precocious sense of localism, already evident in the Quattrocento, was the existence at Sant'Ambrogio of one of the city's few mixed-gender brotherhoods. Spurred by devotional fervor, local parishioners took the initiative in founding the company of Santa Maria della Neve in 1445, during the tenure of Archbishop Antoninus. The foundation account embedded in the company statutes stressed the grass roots origin of the group: "meeting together time after time," these involved parishioners deputized six men of their group to make a binding pact with the abbess and prior in order to form "a devout and spiritual company." From its inception Santa Maria della Neve permitted female members, for whom it kept separate accounts in a "Book of Women." The corporation offered women a privileged tomb site at the foot of the altar of St. Anne, in the nave near the main entrance to the church, along with the chance to participate in organized lay piety.[29]

However, the extent to which local women regularly engaged in the company's devotional practices remains unclear. As Giovanna Casagrande observes, "Female presence does not guarantee meaningful participation."[30] Sisters were expected to partake in the annual company feast and in corporate spiritual benefits, but involvement in other facets of confraternal life, especially its administration, probably remained limited. Moreover, in the early sixteenth century the company of Santa Maria della Neve shifted its basic orientation from a hymn-singing, devotional society to a charitable corporation. By 1536 Santa Maria della Neve had assumed a new religious focus of dowering local poor girls, which may have sealed the transvaluation of women into recipients rather than agents of piety.[31] The parish also supported two other companies: San Michele Archangelo, founded 1474, and the artisan company of Sant'Andrea dei purgatori e cardatori, established in the mid-fifteenth century. Both groups admitted female members but severely restricted their corporate participation.[32]

What propelled the parish and convent of Sant'Ambrogio onto a larger civic and religious stage, however, was the cult of the Holy Miracle. Eve Borsook has

[29]Compagnie Religiose Soppresse, Capitoli, vol. 606, fols. 30v, 37r–38r; for the location of the burial site, see Eve Borsook, "Cults and Imagery at Sant'Ambrogio in Florence," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz* 25 (1981): 147–202, at 183.

[30]Casagrande, "Confraternities and Lay Female Religiosity," 51.

[31]Compagnie Religiose Soppresse, Capitoli, vol. 606, fol. 5r (my pagination), dated 8 October 1536. One documentary sign suggesting that women's presence or participation in the company may have contracted by the late fifteenth century is found in the 1493 redaction of confraternal statutes. For the feast of Corpus Christi, all members of the company were to go in procession wearing company garb, and assemble at their meeting place. There the proveditore was charged with reading aloud the names of "tutti gliohomini [et donne: crossed out] della compagnia." Those members not attending were fined; fols. 38v–39r.

[32]Artusi and Patruno, *Ora et labora*, 73–88.

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thoroughly excavated the history of this cult, centered on one of the earliest recorded eucharistic miracles in Europe.[33] The local Florentine cult of Corpus Christi was launched in 1230, when an elderly priest named Uguccione failed to wipe out the chalice completely after officiating at mass in the church of Sant' Ambrogio and reportedly found warm flesh and blood in it soon afterwards. This miraculous substance was transferred to a crystal vial and quickly became a focal point of adoration. The cult garnered support from an unusually harmonious combination of the bishop, Franciscans, Dominicans, the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio, and various lay organizations. By 1340 a confraternity devoted to the cult had been formed, which received official support from the powerful guild of judges and notaries after 1371.[34] By the early sixteenth century the company permitted female members, although the absence of a matriculation list prior to 1534 makes it impossible to determine when women began entering the group or its exact social composition.[35]

The Corpus Christi festivities embodied in the Miracolo cult intertwined civic and religious dimensions. After 1300 the relic of the eucharistic miracle was paraded annually through the streets in a major civic procession staged within the octave of Corpus Christi in June. The procession, supported initially by the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella, drew hundreds of participants, including members of other lay confraternities.[36] In 1425 the Florentine Signoria elevated the civic status of the event when they decided to join the procession annually for prayers on the raised platform (*ringhiera*) in front of the city hall. The relic was also displayed inside the church three times a year: on the Sunday within the octave of Corpus Christi; on the feast of Sant'Ambrogio; and on the day of the miraculous apparition (December 30).[37] Each of these ritual displays reinforced for pilgrims and parishioners the specific connection between the body of Christ and the convent church of Sant' Ambrogio as a privileged locus of sanctity, over which the nuns were primary guardians and caretakers. Such associations provided an important counterweight in the competition with the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella, who promoted the cult of Corpus Christi doctrinally but could claim no relic of their own.

The relic itself attracted numerous private as well as corporate patrons, whose largesse benefited the nuns along with the cult. Between 1342 and 1482, three successive chapels were built in Sant'Ambrogio to house the relic and the golden casket in which it rested. Boosting the cult's success in the mid-Quattrocento was the per-

[33]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery." For the broader European reception of the cult of Corpus Christi, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[34]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 150, 189 n.31.

[35]Some kind of consorority devoted to the Holy Miracle may have existed prior to 1534. A financial entry dated 23 April 1515 notes the presence of a "conpagnia delle donne," but no other available evidence documents this group or permits a sustained analysis. CRSGF, 79, vol. 27, fol. 105v.

[36]Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 143, notes, for instance, the regular participation of the flagellant company of San Girolamo between 1435 and 1465. The members of Santa Maria della Neve at Sant' Ambrogio were required to attend the festivities, as indicated in n. 31 above.

[37]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 150.

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petual indulgence of six hundred days granted by Pius II in 1459 to any layperson of either sex who gave alms to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi at the church.[38] By 1490 the relic occupied its current site of the Cappella del Miracolo, in the north transept of the church, which was open on two sides facing the nave and chancel (fig. 1).

Here the relic was displayed in a sumptuous marble tabernacle, fashioned by Mino da Fiesole, mounted on the end wall at the height of an altarpiece (fig. 2). Borsook has termed its iconography "a visual diagram of transubstantiation."[39] The infant Jesus rises from the chalice; above it the Holy Spirit descends, while in the top register God the Father confers benediction. The zone at which the powers of the Trinity converge is the focal point of the reliquary itself. Underneath is a small-scale predella that depicts nuns, clergy, and laypersons kneeling in adoration before a priest presenting the relic to the faithful. Flanking the tabernacle on the north (left) wall is a narrative, densely peopled fresco painted by Cosimo Rosselli between 1484 and 1488, to which I will return later[40] (fig. 3).

Although the Florentine cult of the Holy Miracle had a eucharistic focus, it nonetheless was a cult adapted to local needs and circumstances. The Corpus Christi company at Sant'Ambrogio conflated the universalizing aspects of the Eucharist celebrated throughout Europe with the particular local occurrence of a seemingly miraculous event. This orientation, rooted in a specific event, time, and place, gave a highly localized inflection to a universal theme. The cult of Corpus Christi as embodied in the Miracolo had a specifically Florentine coloration that distinguished it from the avalanche of eucharistic corporations common to the Italian Catholic Reformation. The many groups popular in early sixteenth-century Venice, or the model Roman sacramental archconfraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament, propagated honor and reverence for the sacrament of the Eucharist, emphasized the transcendent universal community embodied in the host, and offered spiritual privileges to affiliates.[41] By contrast, the Corpus Christi company and the Cappella del Miracolo commemorated a popular local miracle rather than a widespread eucharistic cult. This distinction was recognized by Archbishop

[38]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, unnumbered insert following inserto 21, dated 7 September 1459. Pius's bull granted an indulgence of a hundred days, but this number was multiplied sixfold by concession of the six cardinals supporting the act. The same indulgence also pertained to alms given at Sant'Ambrogio for the feasts of the Assumption, Sant'Ambrogio, and the dedication of the convent church.

[39]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 180.

[40]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 176, states that Rosselli began work on his murals after July 1484. Anna Padoa Rizzo, "L'ultima bottega di Cosimo Rosselli," *Bolletino dell'Accademia degli Euteleti della città di San Miniato* 58 (1991): 31–39, documents that Rosselli had completed this work by the time he bought a house from Sant'Ambrogio in February 1489.

[41]Richard Mackenney, "The Scuole Piccole of Venice: Formations and Transformations," in *Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 172–89, notes that fifty-seven of the seventy-eight confraternities founded in Venice between 1501 and 1550 were eucharistic foundations. The influential Roman archconfraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, whose constitutions were approved by Paul III in 1539, is discussed by Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 209. On the growth of post-Tridentine sacramental companies in northern Italy, see Danilo Zardin, *Confraternite e vita di pietà nelle campagne lombarde tra 500 e 600: La pieve di Parabiagio-Legnano* (Milan: NED, 1981).

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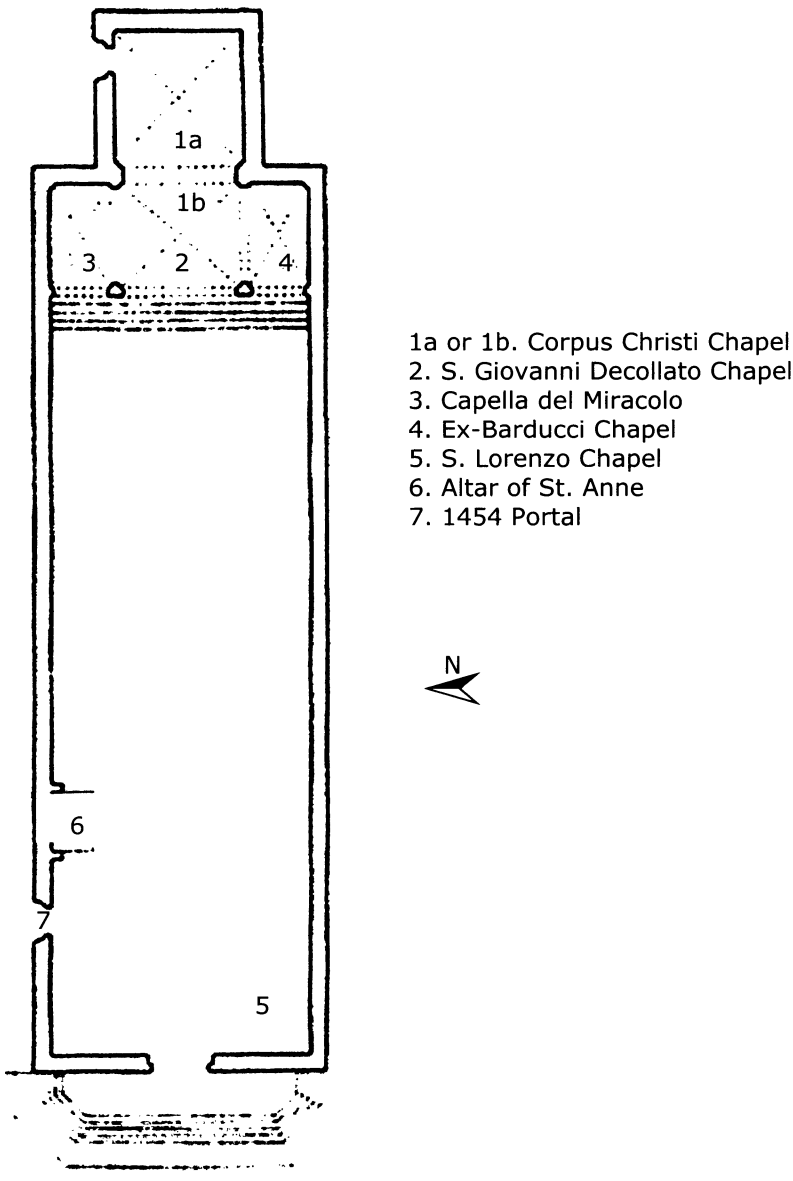

Fig. 1. Ground plan of Church of Sant'Ambrogio, Florence

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Fig. 2. Mino da Fiesole, Tabernacle of the Holy Miracle, Capella del Miracolo, Sant' Ambrogio, Florence, ca. 1483 (Alinari/Art Resource)

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Fig. 3. Cosimo Rosselli, *Procession of the Holy Miracle,* Capella del Miracolo, Sant'Ambrogio, Florence, 1484–88 (Scala/Art Resource)

Cosimo Pazzi when he visited the convent in 1509. During his visit Pazzi admired the "wondrous congealed blood" among the convent's other relics, but distinguished his inquiry about it from the care bestowed on the eucharistic sacrament.[42] The chapel's decorations reinforced this blend of universal and local themes. While Mino's tabernacle illustrated the timeless doctrine of transubstantiation, Rosselli's fresco depicted a specific historical moment in the Florentine ritual narrative. Instead of being disparate elements executed in different media, these images conveyed messages that worked together to form a larger visual and ideological whole.

Despite the cult's success over the centuries, by January 1534 deteriorating circumstances in both city and convent had eroded its fortunes. The first three decades of the sixteenth century were a time of transition, turmoil, and retrenchment in Florence that witnessed the final shift from an oligarchic guild republic to the Medici principate. Between 1494 and 1534 Florence changed regimes rapidly and fell prey to one form of crisis after another: papal interdict, outbreaks of plague, economic instability, siege, and warfare. By the 1510s and 1520s abundant signs revealed that confraternities throughout the city, including the Corpus Christi society at Sant'Ambrogio, were in a state of disarray. Membership and attendance

[42]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 178, makes a similar point. For Pazzi's visit, see AAF, VP, 03.1, fasc. 4, unfoliated.

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declined; communal property went into receivership; key statutes were suspended. Confraternal officials tried to stem the tide by extending pardons (*grazie*) to forgive unpaid dues and debts, and by pooling strengths with other companies. The siege of 1529–30 by imperial troops and recurrent plagues from 1521 to 1540 brought this confraternal crisis to a head. During the siege confraternal meetings were suppressed entirely, while episodes of plague forced the intermittent closing of confraternity doors for months at a time. Although confraternities reopened briefly when the siege ended and the last republic fell in 1530, most groups were prohibited from organizing or meeting until 1540.[43] These disruptions did not spare the old Corpus Christi confraternity at Sant'Ambrogio. Between 1529 and 1532 convent record keeping became unusually sporadic, but it appears from extant accounts that annual subsidies from the guild of judges and notaries to the corporation had ceased. Members had stopped paying their dues.

Exacerbating these acute problems was the chronic pressure placed on monastic finances. Convent finances were strained to the breaking point not only by situational crises but by the longer-term structural effects of rapid monastic expansion that began in the late Quattrocento. From a population of thirty nuns and servants in 1478, the convent grew quickly between 1480 and 1530, accepting between eleven and fourteen new entrants in each of those decades.[44] Although Sant' Ambrogio had ranked as the sixth wealthiest urban female convent registered in the tax surveys of 1427 and 1438, this growth pressed hard on available resources a century later.[45] Like many other female houses of its day, Sant'Ambrogio was caught in a vicious cycle of accepting novices whose dowries were used to offset short-term deficits. However, this strategy in turn only encumbered resources further over the longer term.[46] By the end of the siege in 1530, the nuns of Sant' Ambrogio still owned a sizeable property endowment, the bulk of which consisted of urban properties located within the immediate vicinity of the convent. Nonetheless, during the siege the nuns were unable to collect rents or other income, leaving them cash poor. In 1530 the sharp financial pinch forced the nuns to sell liturgical vessels and ex-votos from the Cappella del Miracolo, which netted about 47 florins.[47] By 1534, the year the consorority was founded, the nuns had to

[43]Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood,* 173–80.

[44]The 1478 population is recorded in Catasto, vol. 989, fol. 58r. At the 1509 visitation of Archbishop Cosimo Pazzi, Sant'Ambrogio reported a population of eighteen professed nuns, six novices, and ten servants, for a total of thirty-four inhabitants; AAF, VP, 03.1, fasc. 4, unfoliated. Although the net gain between 1478 and 1509 seems small, it represented a significant turnover in monastic personnel because an older cohort of nuns died in the period 1490 to 1510. The convent's constitutions set the population limit at fifteen nuns; AAF, VP, 01.1, fol. 1v.

[45]These and other comparative property values are drawn from Gene A. Brucker, "Monasteries, Friaries, and Nunneries in Quattrocento Florence," in *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento,* ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 41–62.

[46]For comparative examples elsewhere in Italy, see the articles in Gabriella Zarri, ed., *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall'alto medioevale al secolo XVII a confronto con l'oggi* (Verona: Il Segno dei Gabrielli Editore, 1997).

[47]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 183.

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borrow small cash sums frequently from their broker Piero Rambatti, whose wife Maria became a member of the Miracolo, and from one of their clerical governors, Messer Leonardo Guasconi, simply in order to buy food and wine. They also were forced to levy a special impost on themselves, requiring the nuns in November 1534 to pay 7 lire apiece to meet "the needs of the convent."[48] The following year the nuns barely broke even, thanks to additional loans from parishioners, their own kin, and other religious women. The convent also profited from the dowry payments of new entrants, which perpetuated the vicious cycle of monastic expansion.[49] Sant'Ambrogio remained in poor financial condition through 1540.[50]

In this time of crisis, with the nuns living hand to mouth and with confraternal activities disbanded, the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio elected to exploit their single most valuable charismatic resource as part of a larger comprehensive strategy to regain both fiscal solvency and their former prominence in the civic-religious landscape. To meet some of their pressing financial and social needs, the nuns turned to the most potent relic they owned: that of the Holy Miracle. For the religious women of Sant'Ambrogio, their future lay in their history. Convent records make clear that it was the nuns themselves who took the initiative to resuscitate the defunct corporation in January 1534, building on the group's previous foundations. When they reconvened the Miracolo company, however, the nuns made a momentous change. They reconfigured the society as an exclusively female group, not as a mixed-gender company. While other Florentine confraternities were transformed into parish companies later in the century, the stakes here were decidedly different. With this precocious reorganization of an older company, the two-hundred-year-old cult of the Holy Miracle came to rest in the hands of an all-female membership managed solely by an all-female religious community.

To attract the widest possible clientele, the nuns excused the past debts of former members and offered membership at half price during the initial month of January 1534 to any woman who wished to join the company.[51] This strategy proved successful in recruiting thirteen new lay members, nine of whom came from artisan households. These new sisters joined forty-three women of diverse background who had been former members. In addition, ten nuns and their servants augmented the company's official ranks by paying dues voluntarily. The annual dues of 10 soldi were identical to

[48]CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fols. 8r, 9r, 10r. The November impost was paid by twenty-one nuns, netting 147 lire.

[49]CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fol. 16r, records 4473.7.4 lire in income for the period 4 May 1535 to 29 May 1536, against expenditures of 4471.7.3 lire for the same period, giving the convent a net surplus of a mere two lire, one denaro. On 22 April 1535 the Dominican nuns of San Jacopo di Ripoli loaned the convent 182 lire (fol. 12r).

[50]CRSGF, 79, vol. 1, fol. 43r, records the alienation of a valuable piece of property to the convent procurator Ser Bacco Baldini, dated 28 January 1540, so the nuns could buy grain to feed themselves: "e la chagione di tale vendita le induce el bisongno e manchamento anno di grano e per choperarnne grano anno fatto la presente vendita come di sopra." The nuns continued to levy imposts on themselves for their grain account through 1540; CRSGF, 79, vol. 29.

[51]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fols. 18r, 28v. The entrance fee set by statute was 20 soldi, reduced to 10 soldi during the month of January 1534 as an incentive.

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what notaries enrolled in their guild were required to contribute yearly to support the older, fourteenth-century Corpus Christi society.[52]

Reviving the cult in this new form was an ambitious and risky venture. To succeed, the project had to mobilize networks of women both inside and outside the parish with whom the nuns enjoyed interwoven strands of kinship, sociability, tenancy, friendship, and interdependence. Although this strategy might not guarantee the rapid gain that could be realized from a single affluent patron, it nonetheless offered two distinct advantages. First, it allowed the nuns to retain greater control over cult management, unencumbered by the demands imposed by private patronage. The nuns already enjoyed sole patronage rights to the Cappella del Miracolo by 1509 and were empowered to appoint its chaplain without impediment.[53] Second, reviving the company offered a way to enhance convent prestige in the more localized arena of parish and neighborhood, which might stimulate additional contributions to the convent and cult treasury. The establishment of the consorority as an all-female group enabled the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio to gain crucial sustainable revenues while becoming bigger players on a smaller stage. In turn, the elevated religious and social status of the nuns both sanctioned and shielded the consororal group.[54] Controlling the miraculous tabernacle, however, laid dangerous claims to the Eucharist itself, giving the nuns an unofficial form of sacramental power. Yet the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio encountered no opposition from the ecclesiastical hierarchy in resuscitating the cult under its new female guardians. Nor did the new bureaucratic oversight of convents established by Cosimo I in 1545 impede the continued functioning of the consorority.[55] Among other political elements critical to the group's success were the more limited localized claims the Miracolo made as a eucharistic cult. The fact that the Miracolo was a specifically Florentine relic guarded by Florentine nuns of high birth must have smoothed the transformation from civic confraternity to local consorority.

The prime movers of this cult revival were two talented senior nuns, Suora Gostanza Cocchi and Suora Agnola Rabatta. Suora Gostanza had been in the convent for exactly fifty years, Suora Agnola for twenty-five, when the company was reconstituted.[56] Well versed in convent lore, conversant with overlapping generations of parishioners, kin to several of the most important local families, these two nuns figured as the first two charter members of the company. The scribe noted that Suora Gostanza, who served as convent treasurer at the time the company was refounded, donated 10 soldi to the group "out of charity to help give a start to this

[52]Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 154. Judges enrolled in the guild were required to pay 20 soldi annually to subsidize the cult.

[53]AAF, VP, 03.1, fasc. 4, unfoliated.

[54]Howe, "Appropriating Space," argues that the membership of lay and religious women in the same confraternity of Santo Spirito in Sassia afforded both constituencies greater latitude.

[55]On the new mechanisms for state supervision of convents instituted by Cosimo, see Arnaldo d'Addario, *Aspetti della controriforma a Firenze* (Rome: Ministero dell'interno, 1972), 132–44.

[56]Nannina ("Gostanza") di Niccolo di Messer Donato Cocchi entered Sant'Ambrogio in 1484; CRSGF, 79, vol. 57, fols. 103v–4r. Lucrezia ("Agnola") d'Antonio d'Antonio da Rabatta entered in 1509, took vows in 1513; CRSGF, 79, vol. 27, fols. 52r, 86v.

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devout and holy work of reviving the Company of the Most Holy Miracle." A similar note accompanied the donation by Suora Agnola, who voluntarily gave money to launch the group, "not because she was obligated."[57] Moreover, these two religious women were among a group of six nuns from the convent who, in 1517, joined the confraternity of the Roman hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, which mixed lay and religious women, in order to obtain its spiritual benefits.[58] The two nuns may have collaborated in other ventures as well. As an accomplished painter and miniaturist, Suora Agnola illuminated a Breviary for the convent in 1518, now conserved in the Biblioteca Laurenziana; the text of the codex was copied by a Suora Gostanza of the same house, probably Gostanza Cocchi.[59] Together with a third savvy nun and future abbess, Suora Laudomina Buondelmonti, who alternated terms as treasurer with Suora Gostanza, this senior group managed all important convent business in the 1520s and 1530s, probably due to the advanced age of the abbess Gherardesca Piccardi.[60] Suora Laudomina also helped launch the company's revival as a dues-paying charter member, who contributed her 10 soldi "out of charity to help and augment the company, not because she was obligated for this payment."[61] It was under Laudomina Buondelmonti's tenure as abbess from 1534 to 1554 that the consorority flourished as an all-female corporation.

The visual power of the Cappella del Miracolo as a cult site could only have enhanced the nuns' initiative to revive the company. The rich mixture of images present there surely played an important role in the devotional experience of *consorelle*, who were engaged spectators of the highest order.[62] As noted above, the chapel's decorations included not only the reliquary tabernacle but also a stunning fresco by Cosimo Rosselli adorning the left wall (fig. 3). The fresco depicts part of

[57]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 28r. "Per elemosina per aiutare dare principio attale devota et sancta opera di risucitare la compagnia del pretiossisimo miracolo." The entry for Suora Agnola reads: "non perche fussi obligata."

[58]CRSGF, 79, vol. 169, no. 176, dated 10 February 1517. Alessandro Neroni, *commendatore* of the hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, conceded to the nuns Arcagnola Bonvanni, Teda Gianfigliazzi, Gostanza Cocchi, Cecilia Boncianni, Francesca della Casa, and Agnola da Rabatta, "entrate nella confraternita del detto spedale, tutte le grazie spirituali concessi ai detti confratri." In March 1524 the entire convent, consisting of the abbess, twenty-one nuns, seven servants, and five other women (probably life tenants), was admitted into the spiritual benefits of the Servite order by its vicar general, Fra Girolamo da Lucca; ibid., no. 183.

[59]Mirella Levi d'Ancona, *Miniatura e miniatori a Firenze dal XIV al XVI secolo. Documenti per la storia della miniatura* (Florence: Olschki, 1962), 11, 400. Suora Agnola's autograph appears in a colophon; the text also contains the autograph of Suora Gostanza. The manuscript is housed in the Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence. Conventi Soppressi, vol. 90.

[60]Gherardesca Piccardi assumed the office of abbess in 1527 at the age of seventy-six. She died in August 1534 and was succeeded by Laudomina Buondelmonti, one of the governing trio discussed here; CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fol. 62r.

[61]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 29r: "per elemosina per aiutare et aumentare la compagnia non perche sia obbligate attale paghamento." The same formula was used to describe the payments made by the nun Suora Bartolomea and the *servigiale* Suora Appollonia, while the notation accompanying payment from the elderly nun Suora Raffaella Antinori similarly noted her intention "to give a start to this resuscitation" (fol. 29v).

[62]Eckstein, *District of the Green Dragon*, 115–17, argues persuasively for the existence of an "intimate relationship between visual representation and the quality of the members' piety."

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the annual Corpus Christi procession that began and ended in the piazza fronting the church of Sant'Ambrogio. Although the exact moment in the processional narrative is unclear, Rosselli nevertheless locates the event clearly in an actual recognizable space filled with familiar characters. The fresco shows the piazza and part of the exterior of the church, viewed from a right angle instead of head-on. Jammed into the piazza is a crowd of men and women of various ages and ranks, grouped casually in clusters. Their gazes, postures, and gestures direct visual movement from left to right toward the focal point of the church door, mimicking in paint the physical direction of the processional itinerary and implying further movement into the church and chapel itself. On the main steps to the church is an enigmatic group of figures. Vasari identifies one figure as the Florentine bishop, standing with his back to the door; he either gives the relic to clerics to carry in procession or receives it back from them.[63] The kneeling clerics have been assigned various identities by scholars.[64] Clustered behind the bishop is a group of six nuns, who probably represented the convent hierarchy; one scholar has identified the most prominent figure positioned on the bishop's right as Abbess Maria Barbadori, who presided over the convent's expansion in the 1480s when the fresco was painted.[65] However, it is not necessary to link these figures with specific personalities to trust the social accuracy of the representation as a generalized record of actual practice.

Rosselli's fresco was a powerful image for this fledgling company of nuns and laywomen because of its location, composition, and subject matter. This visual representation of a major civic event kept alive for nuns the memory of their former reputation and importance, both in their own eyes and in those of a broader public. While there is no evidence that the nuns ever marched in the procession, their presence in the fresco surrounding the church door marked their participation in this ritual as the relic's formal owners and custodians. In one sense, it was irrelevant whether the scene represented the beginning or end of the Corpus Christi procession, because the nuns claimed ownership either in giving the relic away or in retaking possession of it. By distilling the narrative of the procession into a single episode in which the nuns figured prominently, Rosselli's fresco allowed the nuns of Sant' Ambrogio to be visual consumers of their own importance in this centuries-old rite.

The frescoed image of the procession also may have provided a "temporary,

[63]Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori et architetti,* 2 vols. (Florence: Giunta, 1568), 2:437: "Alle sopradette monache di Santo Ambrogio fece la Cappella del miracolo del Sagramento, la quale opera è assai buona e delle sue che sono in Firenze è tenuta la migliore: nella quale fece una Processione finta in sulla Piazza di detta chiesa, dove il vescovo porta il tabernacolo del detto Miracolo, accompagnato dal clero e da una infinità di cittadini e donne con abiti di que' tempi."

[64]Antonio Lorenzoni, *Cosimo Rosselli* (Florence: Libreria internazionale, 1921), 39, suggests the resemblance of the bishop to Antoninus, who died in 1459, and identifies the receiving cleric as the prior of Sant'Ambrogio, Messer Francesco di Stefano della Torre. However, when the chapel was adorned, Messer Francesco was the convent syndic and procurator; the prior was Salvino Salvini. Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 182, posits that the old man kneeling in the center foreground in the piazza itself may have been either the elderly priest Uguccione or the convent prior Salvini. Borsook rightly states that no bishop is visible, despite Vasari's claim; the chief cleric is not wearing a mitre.

[65]Lorenzoni, *Cosimo Rosselli*, 40.

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fictive release from *clausura*" for the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio in the way it depicted them spilling onto the church steps outside the front door.[66] The boundaries of enclosure had tightened between the execution of the fresco in the mid-1480s and the revival of the Miracolo company in the mid-1530s, with new limitations imposed on the nuns' movements by Archbishops Cosimo Pazzi (1508–13) and Andrea Buondelmonti (1532–42).[67] Hence the fresco also kept alive for the nuns the memory of their former practice of breaking the boundaries of cloistered space; at the time of the company's revival, at least five of the convent's senior nuns who entered in the 1480s would have remembered this custom firsthand. Various details of daily life depicted in the fresco allowed nuns a form of visual play or release as well. Careful observers were treated to intimate, refreshing scenes of everyday life outside convent walls, such as a woman hanging her laundry, a cat stalking a bird on a window ledge, and a small dog playing in the street. The background of the composition stretched the eye into the Tuscan hills beyond.

The fiction of moving beyond the spatial boundaries of the exterior church was amplified by the angles of vision from which the nuns could view the fresco. The nuns of Sant'Ambrogio had two main vantage points on the chapel. One perspective was similar to that experienced by laywomen, as the nuns moved up the nave from their portal, located on the north (left) side of the nave near the main door[68] (see fig. 1). On their way to tend the chapel from this portal the nuns necessarily passed the altar of St. Anne, which had special resonance for both laywomen and Benedictine nuns, as well as civic overtones. The altar conjoined the celebration of the cult of the Immaculate Conception, dear to this group of nuns, with that of St. Anne, patron saint of women in childbirth, among others; the altar also referenced the tomb site for female members of the company of Santa Maria della Neve.[69] Although this short internal itinerary resulted in only an indirect view of

[66]Mary-Ann Winkelmes, "Taking Part: Benedictine Nuns as Patrons of Art and Architecture," in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 91–110, quote at 106.

[67]The subject of enclosure is an important and complicated one, which I take up in my forthcoming book. On the open reclusion that pertained in fifteenth-century Italy, see Katherine Gill, "Open Monasteries in Late Medieval Italy," in *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Craig A. Monson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 15–47.

[68]In the fourteenth century the portal to the nuns' quarters was located behind the high altar. In 1454 this door was walled up and a new portal, which still exists, opened further down the nave on the north side. Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 167, notes that according to a mid-seventeenth-century account, "a loggia, or gallery, for the nuns was situated above the chapel to the left of the main altar from which they could have looked down upon" the *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpiece by Filippo Lippi. However, I have found no building accounts that indicate this gallery was in existence by 1534.

[69]For the immaculist ideas associated with the cult of St. Anne, especially at Sant'Ambrogio, see Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 183. The cult of St. Anne had particular meaning in the Florentine civic tradition. On her feast day (26 July) in 1343, the Florentines expelled the alleged tyrant Walter of Brienne, and the feast became an annual civic holiday throughout the republican period, complete with pomp and a priors' procession to the Benedictine convent of Sant'Anna in Verzaia; Roger J. Crum and David G. Wilkins, "In Defense of Florentine Republicanism: Saint Anne and Florentine Art, 1343–1575," in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 131–68.

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Rosselli's fresco, it nonetheless physically touched a key spatial node within the church that vaunted significant female associations.

The second vantage point gave nuns a head-on view of the fresco from the chancel itself. Seen from this more restricted sacralized space inside the chancel screen, inaccessible to the laity, the fresco stood directly in front of their sight lines as they crossed the chancel from the south (right) side to tend the chapel; the tabernacle stood on their right as they approached the chapel from this direction. This perspective replicated the same directional axis and sight lines as would be experienced by a viewer standing on the right (south) side of the piazza, corresponding to the present-day intersection with Via de' Macci. This more privileged perspective encoded for nun-viewers their status as both external witnesses to the rite and participants in it. Regardless of how fictive this release from enclosure may have been, maintaining the chapel and Miracolo altar as the official guardians of both company and cult gave the nuns a legitimate pretext to enter the exterior church on a regular and continued basis, which they exploited throughout the sixteenth century.

The close association between the nuns and the Cappella del Miracolo can be seen in its use as the site for the benediction of the abbess Suora Lionarda Castiglione, who succeeded Laudomina Buondelmonti in February 1554. In May of that year, the nuns staged a lavish ceremony to celebrate her accession to the post, with the Florentine ecclesiastical hierarchy in attendance. "And all the nuns came into the church, and their place was to the side of the altar of the Miracolo. But because they couldn't all fit [in the space], a bench was placed inside of the column all the way up to that altar. And they constructed a beautiful festive apparatus" for the ceremony, after which the nuns treated the clerics to a banquet.[70] Such ritual uses of the site must have added layers of tradition and meaning to the chapel, while visually reiterating for the mixed audience the nuns' long-standing prominence in religious-civic affairs.

Laywomen of the Miracolo company enjoyed a different angle of vision on the chapel, fresco, and tabernacle, from which they probably derived a different set of meanings than those mined by nuns. Lay worshippers approaching the chapel from the left nave saw straight ahead the tabernacle, with its universalizing images of transubstantiation; the more particular narrative of the fresco was situated at an oblique angle to their left. Their view of both elements may have been partially obscured by a grating (*graticola*) of unknown height, on which worshippers and consororal members regularly hung candles, further fragmenting the view.[71] Yet

[70]CRSGF, 79, vol. 2, fol. 61v, dated 15 May 1554. Attending the ceremony were the archbishop's vicar; the Florentine canons Francesco Strozzi, Giovanbattista Desi, and Lionardo Doffi; the bishop of Serristori, who sang the mass; and the priors of San Pier Maggiore and Santa Felicita. "Et in chiesa vennono tutte le monache et il luogho loro fu dal lato del altare del miracolo. Et perche non vi capevano tutte, si messe una pancha per il lungho drento alla Colonna per insino al decto altare. Et si fecie un bello aparato."

[71]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 19v. Company members placed and lit wax candles on various feast days "sulla graticola e non sullaltare dove le monache debbono fornire in tali di alloro spese." Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 176, states that another, wooden grill in the church, carved by Chimenti di Tasso for the chapel of San Lorenzo to the right of the main portal, "probably consisted of a low gate for the chapel like that made in bronze for the chapel of the miraculous mural of the Annunciation at SS. Annunziata."

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parish laywomen could still see themselves depicted in the Rosselli fresco as witnesses to the Corpus Christi procession, however obliquely. Although textual evidence tells us little about laywomen's participation in that rite, Rosselli's fresco imagines laywomen as essential players in the ritual enactment of Corpus Christi to be appreciated by lay and monastic viewers alike. By fixing in paint various female participants, the representation sanctioned the presence of laywomen in both the sacred space of ritual and the sacred space of a church interior, even if in a marginal way. The fifty-six laywomen and charter members of the Miracolo, whose devotional tasks included tending the chapel's exterior grill, would have been reminded of their ritual role from a close vantage point. Importantly, the visual rhetoric of the fresco does not segregate women or code the sacralized space of the piazza as divided along sexual lines, as was common in late fifteenth-century Florentine woodcuts, even though men retain positions of prominence at the frontal plane of the composition.[72]

The founding of the Miracolo consorority in 1534 speaks to several major developments in Florentine religious, political, and social life. The calamitous decades of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with their many moments of crisis, provided exceptional openings for some Florentine women, both lay and religious, just as they did for charismatic female prophets and "living saints" elsewhere in north-central Italy.[73] These opportunities ran the gamut from the engagement of devout women in the Savonarolan movement, to the "transgressive" political activities of powerful Medici women like Alfonsina Orsini Medici, to the restructuring of female patronage and forms of gender representation found in ritual and daily life.[74] Yet the refounding of the Miracolo also signals the development of new features in the institutional landscape that emerged to structure and support these opportunities. The erosion of Florentine civic culture and the subsequent centering of cult life in the city's parishes opened up new arenas for local initiatives. By 1543, when the Miracolo resumed its processional activities, the route taken was a distinctly neighborhood one, instead of a citywide itinerary.[75] Just as

[72]Adrian Randolph, "Regarding Women in Sacred Space," in *Picturing Women*, 17–41.

[73]Gabriella Zarri, "Living Saints: A Typology of Female Sanctity in the Early Sixteenth Century," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 219–303.

[74]On Alfonsina, see Natalie Tomas, "Alfonsina Orsini de' Medici and the 'problem' of a female ruler in early sixteenth-century Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 14 (2000): 70–90, and Sheryl E. Reiss, "Widow, Mother, Patron of Art: Alfonsina Orsini de' Medici," in *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000), 125–57. For changes in women's funerary rites in early sixteenth-century Florence, see Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 230–31.

[75]CRSGF, 79, vol. 1, fol. 64v. On 26 May 1543 the convent of Sant'Ambrogio made a new pact with the judges and notaries' guild to celebrate the feast of the Miracolo annually, with these terms: the guild was obligated to give 8 scudi to underwrite the festivities, while the convent was required to stage the feast and "un poco di procissione" in the morning. The procession was to depart from the church, proceed to the neighboring convent of Le Murate a few blocks away on Via Ghibellina, turn on Via Santa Maria, then return to Sant'Ambrogio. By contrast, the fifteenth-century procession went from Sant'Ambrogio to the Piazza della Signoria, where the bells of the town hall were rung, then on to Santa Maria Novella for mass; Borsook, "Cults and Imagery," 156.

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critical to the success of the consorority's founding, however, was a half-century of monastic expansion. It was the growing power of convents and their highborn personnel that positioned these institutions as important nodes within the urban matrix and made this new form of female association possible.

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The revamped Company of the Miracolo blended traditional elements of confraternal life with new, innovative features. Like other pious corporations that preceded it, the Miracolo offered its members secular remembrance, spiritual rewards, and burial privileges in the company tomb. As the 1534 statutes stated, "every person who enters this company desires to acquire some spiritual prize."[76] In promising material as well as spiritual privileges, however, the consorority drew extensively on the resources of the convent, binding the two corporations into a symbiotic relationship. At the death of a member, whether laywoman or nun, the consorority pledged to provide two torches from convent supplies and four from the company storehouse to honor the corpse; the bier was to be draped with the company pall. On the third day after death, the company's priests, drawn from the convent church, were obligated to perform an office for the deceased's soul and to begin reciting the popular Gregorian mass series within eight days after death.[77] In addition, the company subsidized an annual commemorative office to benefit all "the good souls of the women of the Company of the Miracolo when they have passed from this present life," consisting of sixteen masses celebrated at the chapel altar, to be illuminated by expensive white candles.[78] Convent accounts show that this office was no empty gesture; at the rite of remembrance held in February 1538, a total of forty *consorelle*, priests, and nuns attended.[79] In turn, nuns benefited from the physical presence and prayer cycles of lay members at their deaths. When Abbess Laudomina Buondelmonti died in 1554, her funeral proceedings were augmented by members of three confraternities, although the presence of Miracolo *consorelle* is uncertain.[80]

[76]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 20r: burial honors were provided "perche ciascuna persona che entre in detta compagnia desidere acquistare qualche premio spirituale."

[77]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 20r–v, spells out these provisions, which gave the nuns some latitude if they were short of wax supplies. The rubric set the maximum that could be spent on the Gregorian masses and office at 3 lire, 10 soldi. The consorority seems to have upheld its part of the pact. In 1538 the company priests performed Gregorian masses for the former members Maria, widow of Smeraldo Biffoli, Margherita di Barla, Papera (probably the wife of the architect Giovanbattista), and Baccia, wife of the dyer Marco; they also recited an office for Domenica, mother of the convent servant Suora Domenica, who was a de facto member of the company; ibid., fols. 62v–63r.

[78]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 61r: the statutes prescribed that an "uficio generale" should be performed every January for all "le buone anime delle donne della Compagnia del Miracolo quale fussino passate di questa presente vita."

[79]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 62v.

[80]CRSGF, 79, vol. 2, fol. 59v: "et vi fu ancora la Compagnia della Conceptione perche lei era della detta Compagnia," plus the members of San Michele Archangelo and the women of Santa Maria della Neve ("delle azzurri").

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Burial in the privileged site of the company tomb made membership an attractive option to laywomen of modest means and limited family connections as these choice locations became harder to acquire in the sixteenth century. Several members of the Miracolo who elected this tomb site enjoyed complex relations of dependence and exchange with both convent and consorority. For example, one of the steady patrons of both groups, Alessandra di Piero Bernardi, in 1533 bought lifetime rights to the house on Via Pietrapiana that she had previously rented from Sant'Ambrogio. When she died in December 1557, the house reverted to the convent, and Alessandra found burial "in our church in the tomb of the women of the Company of the Miracolo."[81] In the late 1530s and 1540s Monna Dianora, servant of the long-standing convent patron Calandro Calandri, shuttled back and forth between his household and the convent, where his two daughters and niece lived in temporary guardianship (*serbanza*). After countless daily exchanges with the nuns over the course of a decade, Dianora joined the consorority in 1546, renewed her membership annually with exceptional regularity, and was buried in the company tomb after her death in March 1552.[82]

This interdependence of nuns and laywomen is amply reflected in the group's objectives, division of labor, social composition, and administrative structure. The main purpose of the consorority as articulated in its statutes was to honor the miracle of the precious blood of Christ. To that end the *consorelle*, lay and monastic, promised to observe, maintain, and decorate the altar dedicated to the holy relic.[83] Although the orientation of the company was clearly devotional, its localized eucharistic focus set it apart from many other contemporary consororities elsewhere in Italy geared toward Marian devotion.[84] The central corporate activity was a monthly mass honoring "this miracle," which members were required to attend, offering alms on each occasion. *Consorelle* also celebrated the feast of Candelmas together, when each sister received a small wax candle.[85] If a sister could not attend the monthly mass, she could send the stipulated alms with another member and instead recite three Our Fathers and "many" Hail Marys at home. This provision for participation in absentia implicitly acknowledged a corporate network of recognized members already known to each other, who were charged with mutual support in even this most mundane task. Some lineaments of the female networks already in place when the company was reconfigured are traced by the first set of annual dues collected in January 1534. The dues owed by Ginevra Salvestri were delivered by her friend or neighbor and fellow member, Lucretia di Benedetto di

[81]CRSGF, 79, vol. 1, fol. 5r: "fu sepolta in nostra chiesa nella sepoltura delle donne della Compagnia del Miracolo."

[82]CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fols. 20r, 21v, 23v; vol. 144, fol. 135v

[83]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 19v. This rubric also stipulated the responsibilities of both nuns and the society in adorning the altar on feast days. The company was charged with placing candles "sulla graticola e non in sullaltare dove le monache debbono fornire in tali di alloro spese."

[84]Casagrande, "Women in Confraternities."

[85]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 18r. The four officers received a candle weighing two ounces, whereas "tutte le donne della compagnia" got only a one-ounce taper.

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Cambio; Agata, wife of the mercer Donato, fetched the dues for two other unrelated members, Lessandra del Fantone and Maria del Guiggola.[86] Agata's willingness to assist fellow members in this way probably earned her position as one of the company's first two infirmarians, even though she was a new recruit.

The financial arrangements for the company's ongoing operation further entwined the resources and personnel of convent and consorority. In distributing both financial and devotional responsibilities, however, the company statutes distinguished between nuns and laywomen. According to the statutes, all present and future nuns of Sant'Ambrogio and their servants automatically became members of the company. Since these women lived "a communal life, they would not be able to pay either the monthly offering or the annual tax of 10 soldi."[87] In return for this exemption, the nuns agreed to "guard and maintain the decorated altar, and to keep it furnished with wax" at their own expense.[88] Beside dividing labor effectively, this provision implicitly retained nuns' privileged sacralized status within the chapel's precincts. Laywomen, by contrast, were charged with adorning the exterior grill of the chapel and supplying the necessary tribute of candles.[89] Although common devotions and corporate activities brought nuns and laywomen together in a joint project as "sisters in spirit," these ventures never erased the status distinctions between them. On the feast of the Miracolo, the nuns subsidized a meal for the convent chaplains who served at the mass, although the consoral officers could augment this repast if desired; the company paid the actual stipend to the priests and furnished wax from its coffers, graciously kept under lock and key in the church sacristy by the convent prior. All proceeds donated to the altar's almsbox by visitors and benefactors remained in company hands, with the petty cash generally distributed among the priests and clerics who performed the monthly mass.[90]

Whatever its limitations, the consorority clearly appealed to a wide variety of laywomen. The diverse social composition of the group is documented by the sixty-six members recorded on the original matriculation list of 1534. Almost a third of the members listed, or twenty-one, were the wives of artisans and tradesmen, who were identified by their husbands' occupations. The tasks and identities represented were remarkably diverse, with no single trade predominating. *Consorelle* came from households associated with higher status occupations such as gold

[86]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fols. 30v, 33r–v.

[87]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 18v: "vivendo in comune non potrebbeno pagare l'oferta delli mesi ne la tassa annuale delli soldi dieci."

[88]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 18v: "sono contente observare et mantenere lo altare ornato et quello tenere come per lo addrieto fornito di cera."

[89]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 18r: the annual dues collected from members were intended "per dare principio d'ordinare la cera sara di bisogno intorno al graticolato del miracolo." See also fol. 19v.

[90]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 18v, for articulation of financial responsibilities; fol. 33r, dated 5 March 1534, reports 1 lira, 7 soldi gleaned from the "casetta della limosina per distribuire a preti et cherici per la messa del primo giovedi del mese." An entry on fol. 61v, dated 7 February 1534, records payment of 16 soldi "per una chiave et una toppa per la cassa del priore el quale priore per sua benignita dette alla compagnia del miracolo la sua cassa di sagrestia accioche e potessino reporre et tenere serrata la loro cera la quale cassa haveva toppa et chiave."

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beater, architect, and money changer, as well as from those engaged in everyday life tasks such as baker, miller, shoemaker, and innkeeper. Joining the company were wives of textile workers such as linen manufacturer, draper, doublet maker, weaver, and dyer, along with wives of men who worked outside the guild structure (*sottoposti)* as farrier, messenger, and valet. Given the strong parish traditions operating in Sant'Ambrogio, and the familiarity with which the scribe recorded occupational details, it is reasonable to infer that virtually all these women were parishioners, neighbors, or tenants.[91]

The second largest identifiable group inscribed in the original matriculation list, roughly one quarter (24 percent), consisted of sixteen women bearing surnames. Several of these wives and widows belonged to prominent parish families such as the Saltarelli, Salvestri, and Granacci. Yet not all of these socially distinguished women lived in the parish. Others enjoyed overlapping ties of kinship to one or several nuns, as well as local neighborhood interests in the surrounding vicinity. Joining the company as a new recruit was Lisabetta Albizzi, whose family stronghold lay in the neighboring parish of San Pier Maggiore; her enrollment helped support the project initiated by her kinswoman Suora Gostanza Albizzi, one of the senior nuns and a formal Miracolo member. Maria Rambatti, another new recruit, was married to one of the convent's main brokers and purveyors of goods, who had made small loans to the convent during its time of troubles. Still other women with surnames, however, such as Cleofe Rucellai, Margherita Magalotti, and Lisabetta Puccini—all new members—did not reside in the parish or neighborhood, although some of their kinsmen rented or owned property nearby.[92] These women probably were bound to the nuns and convent by complex ties of kinship, patronage, and piety that have yet to be documented.[93]

Comprising the third most numerous group of company members were ten religious women from the convent (eight nuns and two servants) who paid dues and

[91]The absence of surnames, coupled with the lack of a recent, comprehensive tax report or parish register, makes systematic identification unfeasible. Anecdotal evidence drawn from convent account books, however, documents various kinds of transactions between some of the Miracolo members and the convent. For example, Baccia, wife of the dyer Marco and charter member, was both parishioner and tenant. By 1540 Brigida di Santi had become a lay resident in the convent (*commessa*). CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fols.1v, 40v.

[92]In the 1561 census of property holdings undertaken by Cosimo I, at least seven men sharing the same surname as Miracolo members appear as either property owners or renters in the neighborhood of Sant'Ambrogio, although they were not necessarily tenants of the convent. Decima Granducale, vol. 3783.

[93]For example, the customary offering for the consecration of five new nuns into the community in May 1533 was paid by Messer Lando dell'Antella, husband of Miracolo charter member Francesca; the reason for this patronage is unclear, however, as his daughter was not among the nuns. CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fol. 3v. In the late 1530s several households belonging to the Fantone and Puccini, whose families were represented among Miracolo members, had either placed girls in temporary guardianship in Sant'Ambrogio or subsidized their stays there; ibid., fol. 20r. For a discussion of the thick ties binding noble families and convents in another Italian urban context, see P. Renée Baernstein, "In Widow's Habit: Women between Convent and Family in Sixteenth-Century Milan," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (1994): 787–807.

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officially joined the group.[94] Most of the nuns who contributed voluntarily were senior members of the community, having resided in the convent for decades. In several cases they brought to bear considerable administrative experience gained in convent offices as well as a vigorous set of kinship ties that embraced both secular families and other Benedictine houses. For example, Suora Laudomina Buondelmonti, one of the consorority's first official members, had joined the convent more than fifty years earlier, in 1482. She performed regular stints in the rotation of convent offices, including the position as treasurer during the troubles of 1529, and was elected abbess several months after the company's foundation. Throughout her convent career, Laudomina facilitated ongoing commerce between Sant'Ambrogio and the powerful nearby Benedictine convent of San Pier Maggiore, where her sister Suora Andrea had served as abbess from 1507 to 1528.[95] One of her kinsmen, Messer Andrea Buondelmonti, became archbishop of Florence in 1532, holding that post for a decade; the extent to which this relationship enhanced or protected the consorority is unclear at this time. A thicket of networks bound nuns not only to their secular kin, friends, and neighbors but to other nuns as well, all of whom might help the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio leverage their projects. Rounding out the list of original members were three widows (including one designated as a retailer), four women identified only by place names from the surrounding countryside, and twelve women for whom no occupations or surnames are given.

The consorority continued to attract a socially mixed clientele into the 1550s, albeit in smaller numbers. The only full matriculation list for the group dates from 1534; haphazard membership records kept in subsequent years, common to religious companies of the time, makes a precise count or social analysis of membership unfeasible for later decades. However, the company kept a running tally of members through 1547, with various addenda regarding dues and occasional death dates extending to 1556.[96] It appears that at least thirty-six new members joined the consorority between 1534 and 1550, and their social origins revealed the same striking heterogeneity as the charter group. Joining the company in the 1540s were nine

[94]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fols. 28r–30r. The nuns who paid official dues were Gostanza Cocchi (entry date 1484), Agnola da Rabatta (entry date 1509), Gostanza Albizzi (entry date 1506?), Laudomina Buondelmonti (entry date 1482), Bartolomea (unidentified), Rafaella Antinori (d. 1534), Lucrezia Doffi (entry date 1528), plus one anonymous nun ("una reverenda monaca di Sant'Ambrogio la quale volle essere delle nostra compagnia et non volle dare il suo nome"). The two serving sisters were Domenica ("devota serva") and Appollonia ("servigiale"). Information on entry dates and convent offices is culled from internal convent records.

[95]For Laudomina, see CRSGF, 79, vol. 57, fols. 63v–64r; vol. 58, fols. 129v–30r; vol. 62, fols. 396v–97r.

[96]The following discussion is based on CRSGF, 79, vol. 144. The list of dues-paying members enrolled in 1534 includes five names not on the original matriculation list: Dorotea di Giovanni, *barbiere*; Maria, widow of Smeraldo Biffoli; Albiera di Francesco; Caterina, servant of Ser Giovanni Pierozzi; and Lisabetta di Michele, *ortolano* (fols. 94v–125v). There is a gap in the running entries between 1534 and 1538, with dues payments for these years added later. Fourteen members are recorded as entering in 1546, but this figure probably represents a better scribal practice rather than an exceptional influx (fols. 8r, 125v–42v). One additional sister, Buona d'Antonio Boscholi, is reported as joining the company in August 1556 (fol. 2r).

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widows, several serving women, the wives and daughters of valets, cart drivers, dyers, tailors, shoemakers, butchers, wool beaters, shopkeepers, and immigrants from other Tuscan cities and villages. The fragmentary nature of the evidence makes it impossible to determine how long members remained associated with the consorority; the best that can be said is that at least seven of the original *consorelle* sustained their membership into the period 1547–50.

This diversity of social backgrounds sustained over several decades suggests that the consorority acted as a locus of neighborhood integration as well as a public place where social prestige and power could be displayed and negotiated. Like all-male companies, the consorority offered occasions for sociability at monthly masses and other feast days, for demonstrations of individual largesse in almsgiving, and for extending networks of prayer and remembrance after death. But there was more than just a generic female sociability at stake here. The consorority offered women of the parish, some of them newly arrived in the city, a valuable point of entry into parish and neighborhood life, along with an acknowledged social role in local networks.[97] Small individual initiatives undertaken by members—collecting dues for an absentee member, alerting sisters to another member's illness, prodding reluctant sisters to attend meetings—were recognized and rewarded by their peers and neighbors, and occasionally captured in convent records.

Members could further enhance their social visibility, both to themselves and to local audiences, by means of the annual Corpus Christi procession, which remained a significant neighborhood event despite having been stripped of its civic trappings in the early years of the Medici principate. In the lean years of the 1530s, the company and convent struggled to stage a respectable celebration featuring an adequate contingent of clergy, wax, and festive foodstuffs. Limited subsidies from the guild of judges and notaries resumed in 1539, and in 1543 the guild increased its annual payment to 8 scudi. With this solid financial backing, the convent and company began celebrating the feast of the Miracolo with greater splendor in the 1540s and 1550s. Although the proconsuls of the guild still marched in the procession, the addition of more priests drawn from neighboring institutions, an organist for mass, a festive apparatus inside the church, and the recitation of vespers beforehand gave the proceedings a more pronounced ecclesiastical and parochial character. After 1545 the group consistently spent over twice as much on the feast of the Miracolo as on its second major celebration, the feast of Sant'Ambrogio.[98] As the celebration was reestablished on this new footing, *consorelle* supported local plan-

[97]Esposito, "Men and Women in Roman Confraternities," argues that Roman companies performed a similar function of social integration.

[98]In 1539 and 1540, the guild paid 35 lire to subsidize the feast; CRSGF, 79, vol. 29, fols. 32v, 40v. The guild made regular annual payments of 56 lire (the accounting equivalent of 8 scudi) through at least 1557; CRSGF, 79, vols. 31, 32. An organist was added in 1547, vespers and extra priests (up from twenty-four to thirty-four) in 1548, the *apparato* in 1552; CRSGF, 79, vol. 30, fol. 131r; vol. 31, fols. 55r, 131r. In 1546 the convent spent about 35 lire on the Miracolo feast compared to 18 lire for the feast of Sant'Ambrogio; by 1552 that gap had widened, with 75 lire expended for the Miracolo versus 22 lire for the second feast; CRSGF, 79, vol. 30, fols. 117r, 124r; vol. 31, fol. 131r. The sermon for the Miracolo feast generally was preached by a Franciscan friar from Santa Croce.

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ning efforts and may have figured explicitly in the procession. The pact struck between the guild and Sant'Ambrogio in May 1543 stipulated that the relic should be accompanied in procession by members of the "bianchi" confraternity, a reference to the company of San Michele as well as by "those women of the blue garb," a reference to the female members of Santa Maria della Neve.[99] Although the *consorelle* of the Miracolo were not mentioned explicitly in this agreement, their participation may have been assumed, and seems likely given that women members of the other parish companies could join the festivities. In any case, the transformation of the procession from a civic to a local itinerary opened up still other arenas of activity from which women had been precluded under the republican regime.

The common projects of the organization—devotional and festive activities, as well as administrative duties—enabled cross-class relations to take place in a structured environment that blurred social and political differences among women. To be sure, the group never erased these distinctions; but in bringing together women from different social ambits, the Miracolo promoted an older corporate model of cooperation and fictive kinship that was rapidly eroding in early sixteenth-century Florence. In this important sense, the Miracolo was a profoundly traditional, even conservative organization, despite its obvious opportunistic qualities. The formal community of religious women at Sant'Ambrogio mediated these cross-class relations; it benefited directly when local exchanges went well, when local laywomen gained organizational experience, when local networks became energized. On occasion the convent also profited from the small-scale patronage company members could procure from male relatives. For instance, in September 1549 the weaver Benedetto da Poppi, married to the charter member Lisabetta, lent the nuns 35 lire in cash to cover a shortfall in their daily expenses; the nuns repaid the loan without interest six months later.[100]

The company's administrative structure also helps to account for its enthusiastic reception by women of diverse backgrounds. The society offered a unique space not only for organized religious expression and social integration, but also for the exercise of formal power. In its model of governance the Miracolo took its cues from three different corporate bodies: commune, convent, and confraternity. Like the Florentine commune and other all-male societies, the consorority selected leaders from its own ranks and rotated offices extensively, using a biannual sortition process highly reminiscent of the way that communal affairs had been organized for centuries.[101] Heading the company were four officers, similar to the three or four

[99]CRSGF, 79, vol. 1, fol. 64v: "et s'acompagnia de' bianchi et quelle delli azurri [*sic*]." Decima Ganducale, vol. 3783, fols. 179v–180r, refers repeatedly to the Company of Santa Maria della Neve as the "Compagnia delli Azzurri." It was not uncommon to distinguish the women's branch of this company by using the feminine ending; for instance, Abbess Laudomina Buondelmonti, one of the Miracolo's charter members, was honored at her death by the "compagnia delle azzurri"; see n. 80.

[100]CRSGF, 79, vol. 31, fols. 13v, 75r.

[101]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 19r. The officers' names were to be selected from a pouch every April and October. Rank-and-file members owed the officers the "reverentia et ubbidientia che merita il grado che tengono in detta compagnia."

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officers who generally headed male-only brotherhoods. Assisting these chief officers were a treasurer, a sacristan, and two infirmarians charged with visiting sick members daily, all of whom held office for six months. Company statutes drew on traditional corporate rhetoric when they recognized that "every corporation (*università*) which does not have a head or government (*capo o reggimento*) stands in danger of ruination."[102] Importantly, however, the consorority's statutes made little use of the rhetoric of kinship. Noteworthy by its absence was the governing metaphor of family that provided a legitimizing cover for Medicean ascendancy throughout the fifteenth century, which nuns had skilfully deployed when petitioning favors from Lorenzo il Magnifico.[103] This departure from the prevailing norms of familial discourse looms especially large because the consorority took shape just as the rhetoric of ritual kinship in other north-central Italian religious corporations was being transvalued from horizontal to vertical.[104]

The corporate models from which the consorority borrowed quickly became suffused with monastic practices. Each officer was required to be at least forty years old, the same age as mandated by rule for a Benedictine abbess. This prescriptive age probably originated with the nun-founders of the group, who borrowed from their own corporate constitutions in seeking experienced leadership. But this same age threshold also had a particular social resonance for laywomen: it paralleled the customary age of forty that separated marriageable widows still able to bear children from their older, sometimes more autonomous peers.[105] Setting the age mandate for female officers at forty expressed a consoroal vision of mature women governors who were less subject to conflicting family pressures that might have forced their relocation to new households or presented them with new demands of motherhood. The hybrid composition of the company, however, forced certain departures from familiar corporate models. Rather than discharge their duties without further supervision, the officers exercised their authority "together in agreement with the reverend abbess as well as the whole body of the company, with the advice of whatever reverend prior one will find at various times in that house."[106]

[102]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 19r: "perchè ogni università che non ha capo o reggimento sta in pericolo di ruina."

[103]For Cosimo as "pater patriae," see Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 180–88. For nuns' letters and petitions that relied on the discourse of fictive kinship, see F. W. Kent, "Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli e la politica di mecenatismo architettonico nel convento delle Murate a Firenze (1471–72)," in *Arte, committenza ed economia a Roma e nelle corti del Rinascimento (1420–1530)*, ed. Arnold Esch and Christoph Luitpold Frommel (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), 353–82.

[104]Terpstra, "Politics of Ritual Kinship," 7.

[105]Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "The 'Cruel Mother': Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in idem, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 117–31, argues that women over forty were subject to fewer family pressures to remarry, but also might be left destitute by their natal and marital kin.

[106]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 19v: the officers exercised their authority "dacordo insieme con la reverenda badessa quanto tutto il corpo della compagnia col consiglio del reverendo priore che si troverrà [*sic*] tempo per tempo in questo luogho."

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The remarkable social heterogeneity seen in the company rank and file was reflected in the first set of officers. Eight laywomen were selected as officials for an initial ten-month term beginning 1 January 1534. Of the first four officers chosen, two women bore surnames (Caterina Bevilacqua and Lionarda Ginori), while the other two were identified by their husbands' occupations of valet and money changer. While all four chief officers had been members of the Miracolo prior to 1534 and may already have been active in neighborhood affairs, the other officers represented a mix of old and new recruits. The group's treasurer, Francesca, wife of Lando dell'Antella, was a new entrant; presumably her personal talents and kin connections with this old magnate family gave her the necessary skills for this important position. The sacristan, identified simply as Agnola di Francesco, had been a member prior to the reorganization, but the two women charged with visiting sick members, the mercer's wife Agata and the carpenter's wife Francesca, were both new recruits.[107] It is worth underlining the fact that the first officers selected did not embody the kind of explicit hierarchy seen in later sixteenth-century custodial societies, where well-born women occupied supervisory positions and lower-born women subordinate ones.

In addition to the company's social and religious attractions, managing a corporate administrative apparatus presented a unique opportunity for Florentine women in more strictly political terms. Although both wealthy women and working women might turn their managerial talents to household advantage when circumstances warranted, they continually met with stiff opposition to any formal role in corporate affairs. In the mixed-gender religious companies of Renaissance Bologna, the inability to exercise significant self-governance probably led to poor retention rates among female members.[108] Closer to home, Savonarola's radical proposal in March 1496 that women in each quarter form a committee to organize their own reform met with rapid refusal by both a male and female follower.[109] In contrast to the prevailing Florentine view that governance was a purely male affair, the Miracolo's administration turned exclusively on the talents and limitations of its female personnel, except for a male scribe. Moreover, corporate statutes gave the officers a degree of latitude in exercising their own judgment. For example, the officers could determine the scale of the annual commemorative office celebrated for defunct members based on their assessment of available resources; in turn, the chief officers were rewarded with small but special marks of status such as painted candles that distinguished them from the rank and file.[110] Membership in the com-

[107]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 160r.

[108]Nicholas Terpstra, "Women in the Brotherhood: Gender, Class, and Politics in Renaissance Bolognese Confraternities," *Renaissance and Reformation* 24 (1990): 193–212.

[109]F. W. Kent, "A Proposal by Savonarola for the Self-Reform of Florentine Women (March 1496)," *Memorie domenicane,* n.s. (1983): 335–41; Natalie Tomas, *"A Positive Novelty": Women and Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Melbourne: Monash Publications in History, 1992), 49–50.

[110]At the first monthly celebration of the reconfigured company in January 1534, the four officers, along with the abbess, prior, and sacristan, all received more elegant painted candles. CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 61r.

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pany, with its real promise of the direct administration of corporate affairs, offered a rare opening for women in Florentine public life and a unique form of political citizenship to women disadvantaged by class or gender.

The emphasis on maintaining the female character of the company can be seen as well in the handling of corporate devotional activities. Addressing the intersection of piety and power, the Company of the Holy Miracle inverted the customary roles of men and women found in mixed-gender societies. Men who wished to participate in the spiritual benefits of the organization could join the group by paying half the entrance fee required for a female member, along with equivalent annual dues. At his death a *fratello* was entitled to the same rites benefiting his soul as described for spiritual sisters; *fratelli* also shared in the collective commemoration celebrated annually for the dead sisters and benefactors of the corporation. The statutes were adamant, however, that under no circumstances were brothers to have any authority within the company ("non habbia alcuna autorita in detta compagnia"). Rather, men were to be considered as "spiritual adjuncts" or subordinates of the company ("si chiamino commessi spirituali della compagnia del miracolo").[111] From a structural and prescriptive standpoint, at least, the company statutes made every effort to protect the centrality of women's power and participation. In fact, financial records indicate that, over the next thirty years, only one man officially joined the company. In 1540 Pagolo di Girolamo Cini, son of the wax dealer with whom the consorority had a long-standing account, joined the company along with his wife, Caterina. This couple may have been moved by a combination of good business practice, self-interest, mutual affection, and pious admiration for the nuns and cult.[112]

The objectives and meanings of women governing women raise complex political issues that can only be suggested here. Part of the traditional task of Florentine confraternal administration was to provide members with "an education in republican civic procedure and culture," from whose formal apparatus women were categorically excluded throughout the guild republic.[113] Although David Peterson reminds us that not all Italian religious activity need be read through a civic lens,[114] the development of this consorority must be framed by the larger transition from republic to principate. The republican bias in Florentine historiography has cast this transition in a negative light. Yet it seems unlikely that such a corporate group, espousing no civic redemptive mission or rites of passage for young boys, could have flourished in a robust republican environment, despite the leverage offered to some women by their social class and kin connections. It was the very localism signaled by the retreat to the parish and the loss of the cult's former civic status that

[111]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fol. 20v.
[112]CRSGF, 79, vol. 144, fols. 126v, 127v.
[113]Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 58.
[114]David S. Peterson, "Out of the Margins: Religion and the Church in Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 835–79.

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enabled a new, limited form of public life for some Florentine women outside the charmed circle of Medicean patronage.

Although there is much to be learned about this consoroal organization—its complex relations to social and political power, the religious meanings it held for members, its fortunes after Trent—the evidence uncovered thus far permits several important conclusions. First, the advent of this devotional company reaffirms the new parochialism of cult life in early sixteenth-century Florence elucidated by Richard Trexler, Ronald Weissman, and others, but redirects our attention to its gendered consequences. In the pivotal decades of the 1530s and 1540s, new kinds of devotional activities, with their greater ceremonial emphasis, worked hand in hand with evolving political and institutional structures to give Florentine laywomen adaptive avenues for the expression and exercise of piety, sociability, and power. Second, the creation and maintenance of the company complicates our understanding of a changing institutional landscape by highlighting the role of convents as crucial resources for women. It was not just parishes but the clout of female religious communities that reshaped the social and religious map of early sixteenth-century Florence. Convents channeled the political acumen of both lay and religious women as they navigated the shifting currents of religious and political change. Finally, the Miracolo company articulates aspects of female sociability and the nature of women's ritual kinship. The group's arrangements and operations make clear that spiritual sisterhood hinged on concrete reciprocity, but with a different valence than that offered by male symbolic kinship. Working from a position of institutional strength, nuns showcased personal initiative as well as communal prestige, enlarging the scope of their influence by means of this venture. In turn, laywomen of divergent backgrounds found a rare opportunity to engage in corporate piety, extend their networks across boundaries of status and space, and manage their own affairs. The interdependence between nuns and laywomen eased but never erased status distinctions; it also promoted hybrid forms of association that supported a rich variety of women's religious experiences. We need not romanticize this consorority to appreciate its historical significance.

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